

AN INTRODUCTION TO BYZANTINE MUSIC¹

I REGARD it as a great privilege to be allowed to speak to you about Byzantine music and to introduce a performance of some melodies, chosen from MSS of the flourishing period of Byzantine ecclesiastical music.

Members of the Hellenic Society will be aware how much we owe to the indefatigable work of my friend and collaborator, Professor H. J. W. Tillyard, whose contributions in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* and in the *Annual of the British School at Athens* during the last twenty-five years have gradually aroused interest in this particular field of studies, not only here, but in all countries in which scholars are dealing with Byzantine studies. Our mutual interest in Byzantine music and our aim to decipher its musical signs have made us collaborators for a long time, and I am glad to say that this co-operation has proved felicitous.

Our method of investigation may be compared with that of an archaeologist, who is obliged first to clear the foundations of a more recent place before he is able to unearth the traces of an old city. We, however—if I may continue the comparison—have had the good luck to discover a whole town, completely intact, in all its splendour. Our rather hard and often discouraging task to find the clue to the riddle of Byzantine notation was finally rewarded. We discovered that the Byzantine neumes not only helped to read the melodic line, but also contained dynamic and rhythmical signs, providing the most subtle nuances of expression. This discovery enables us to revive Byzantine melodies as they were sung in the time of the Byzantine Empire. Visitors to the East, who have heard the present method of singing in Greek churches, will find a great difference between the modern practice and Byzantine singing. Byzantine melodies were sung diatonically; modern Greek ecclesiastical music has been influenced by Turkish scales and the Turkish way of singing. This influence was not destroyed by the reform at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Musical MSS of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries have, therefore, preserved the pure state of Byzantine melodies, and a comparison of these MSS reveals an un-

¹ A lecture delivered at the Joint Meeting of the Societies for the Promotion of Hellenic and Roman Studies in the Chapter House of Christ Church, Oxford, on August 29th, 1942.

broken tradition with comparatively slight and unimportant variants.

The first phases of a musical notation can be found in MSS dating from the ninth to twelfth centuries. They show a great similarity to the Latin neumes of the same period. Unfortunately, we do not possess any MSS with musical signs of a period prior to the ninth century. Whatever the reason for the lack of documents of an earlier date may be: we can take it for granted that a primitive notation was used already in the eighth and seventh century, if not at an even earlier date. The first phases of Byzantine musical notation do not possess distinct signs for each melodic interval. However, these signs have often a dynamic or rhythmical value. A comparison with the later, fully developed stage of notation gives us the following explanation of the method of fixing the intervals for only a few passages of the melody.

Byzantine melody consisted of a number of formulae used in many hymns of the same mode. The formulae were well known to the singers; as a matter of fact, the singers knew them by heart. It was, therefore, only necessary to introduce those signs which determined the relationship of these formulae to a particular set of words, and it was not necessary to write out the formulae in full. Interval-signs were at that early stage only necessary where the composer linked formulae together; these intervals were mostly ascending or descending seconds, or the repetition of the same interval, called *Ison*. Gradually this system of notation was found to be not sufficiently clear; but whilst the Western monks introduced lines, first one, then two, three and four, in order to fix the exact compass of a melody, the Byzantine theorists perfected the notation itself. Towards the end of the eleventh century a new system can be found, the musical signs of which are indicating not only the range of intervals precisely, but also the dynamic and rhythmical value of each tone. This system will be found in MSS from the end of the eleventh century to the fifteenth. Byzantine music deteriorated rapidly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Melodies became overloaded with ornaments, influenced by the taste of the conquerors, and the musicians could hardly find their way through the jungle of complicated musical signs. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mark a further decline of Byzantine music. The tradition was maintained by oral training only; hardly anybody understood the significance of the signs any more. A reformed notation, therefore, was introduced in 1821 by Chrysanthus of Madytos. That is the notation we find nowadays in use in the printed books of the Greek Church. Unfortunately, the reform was undertaken without any scholarly background, at a time when Byzantine music was utterly corrupted; and

no attempt was made to restore the treasury of Byzantine music from the old MSS.

The editors of the *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae* therefore hope that their task of transcribing these melodies from musical MSS of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries may not only be regarded from the point of view of antiquarian curiosity, but may inspire in better times to come the authorities of the Greek Church to re-introduce the kind of singing which was practised in the days of the Byzantine Empire.

The repertory of Byzantine melodies has been transmitted mainly in two groups of musical MSS: in the *Hirmologium* and in the *Sticherarium*, sung during the Hours of the Office. As far as we know, the melodies sung during Mass have not been preserved in old MSS. *Hirmus* is the name given to a strophe, used as a model for the other strophes of an Ode. Nine Odes form a Canon. The best known authors of this genre of hymn-writing are: Andrew of Crete, John Damascene, Cosmas of Jerusalem, Theodore and Joseph of the Studion Monastery. *Sticheron* is the name of a monostrophic hymn, originally inspired by a verse of a psalm, and often interspersed between the strophes of a Canon. They are collected in a bulky volume, the *Sticherarium*, containing more than 1,700 of these poems. The melodies of the *Stichera* are more extended and richer than the *Hirmi*.

All these melodies are composed in one of the eight modes used by the Eastern Church, similar to the ecclesiastical modes of the Western. All the melodies of a mode contain a limited number of musical formulae characteristic of the mode. The art of the composer consists in choosing some of these formulae and adapting them to the words of a hymn. The Byzantine composer could not act as a Western composer by inventing a melody, just as he liked to do. He had to use certain traditional formulae and his art consisted in giving to these formulae the right expression and, further, in connecting these formulae together by some passages. The composer's task was not, therefore, to invent as many original melodies as possible, but to 'compose' a new melody from old and well-known formulae and cadences, or to write a variation on a given melody, in which some new features appeared, in spite of a close connection with the original. The artist's expression had to adapt itself to the spirit of the Orthodox liturgy and could never break the rules by adopting a personal accent in its relations with the object of worship. He felt himself, in company with all the other artists, as a link in a chain, with his place in the ranks of the faithful, his position determined by his piety. This ordering of the faithful passes over into the ranks

of the Celestial Hierarchy which Denys the Areopagite explained in his book on the Heavenly Hierarchy. Here we find the passage that the angels are the 'hymn-singers' of the Glory of God. And St. Chrysostom could say that the psalms are a work of men but the hymns of divine essence, for the superior powers sing hymns, but not psalms.

Let us begin with some strophes from the first, second and ninth Ode of the famous Canon for Easter Day, called the 'Golden Canon' or 'the Queen of Canons,' written by John Damascene, who died about 780 A.D. Saint John Damascene is the last but one of the Fathers of the Eastern Church and one of her greatest poets. He lived in a time of great anxieties for the Church, in the time of the Iconoclastic controversy and his defence of Icons has procured him the title of 'The Doctor of Christian Art.' The poem of John Damascene is well known in this country from Neale's translation. The first ode begins with the words 'Tis the day of Resurrection,' the second with 'Come and let us drink of that new River,' the ninth with 'Thou new Jerusalem, arise and shine.' The music of the 'hirmi' is composed in the first mode and is of the syllabic type: one or two notes corresponding to each syllable.

EXAMPLE I: *Αναστάσεως ἡμέρα.*

A more elaborate example of the same type represents the first strophe of the first ode of a Canon by Kyprianos for the *Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross*, celebrated on September 14th. The origin of this feast has to be sought in the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday, celebrated in Jerusalem already in the fourth century. But during the sack of the Holy City by the Persians in 614 the Holy Cross was lost again and the ceremony could not take place any more until it was rediscovered after the victory of Heraclius in 626. Now a special feast was introduced by the Eastern Church to commemorate the event.

Kyprianos, the author of the Canon, is one of the many minor poets of the Eastern Church. The melody belongs to the syllabic type which we know already from the Easter-Canon, but is more extended, and represents a mixture between a recitative and a tune.

EXAMPLE II: *Σταυρου τὸ ξύλον.*

The next group is taken from the *Nativity-Cycle* and brings some monostrophic hymns of the large groups of *Sticheraria*. These hymns seem to have been sung by a soloist, as their structure is much more complicated than that of the *Hirmi*, which we have heard just now. There is, above all, one hymn which is remarkable by its dramatic character. It belongs to a group of twelve *Idiomela*,

ascribed to Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem from 634 to 638. In fact, these twelve poems can be regarded as a kind of Nativity play, a forerunner of the medieval religious drama. The first poem is an invitation to Bethlehem to prepare the cradle and to make the cave hospitable, for the truth has come, the darkness passed away, and God, born of a Virgin, has appeared among men. This jubilant mood is maintained in the second poem. With the third, the dramatic dialogue between St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin begins. Joseph is mortified by the happenings which he cannot explain, and he wants to banish her. The following eight poems can be compared with strophes of a Greek drama, in which the Chorus expresses his thoughts and feelings, and prepares the audience for the understanding of the facts, unknown to them. And now the Blessed Virgin gives answer to the complaints of Joseph, and reveals to him the great mystery.

The melody of the words is full of passion and ecstasy, richly ornamented and perfectly adapted to the words: it is, in fact, equal to the most famous Gregorian chants.

EXAMPLE III: *Οτε 'Ιωσήφ.

The number of monostrophic hymns in honour of the Nativity is abundant. They are equalled only by those to celebrate the Passion and Resurrection, and both groups are the most elaborately constructed of all the feasts of the ecclesiastical year. I should like you to hear only one more hymn of the Nativity cycle, a variation of the *Gloria in excelsis*.

EXAMPLE IV: Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις (reproduced on page 380).

As this is a Joint Meeting of the Hellenic and Roman Societies, I should not miss the opportunity of bringing to your notice a Byzantine hymn which was sung in the Church of Benevento in the eleventh century, both in Greek and Latin. Only a few of these bilingual hymns have been transmitted in manuscripts. But fortunately one of the most venerable examples has been preserved in two Codices, the one written at Benevento, the other at Ravenna. It is a hymn sung during the Adoration of the Holy Cross on Good Friday. The original ceremony on Good Friday has survived in the Roman rite; here it was introduced in the time of Pope Honorius I (625-8), but admitted as a festival only under the Oriental Pope Sergius I (687-701).

We know from the *Peregrinatio ad loca Sancta* that already in the fourth century hymns were sung during the Adoration of the Cross. We learn, moreover, from the Georgian version of a Kanonion, composed in Jerusalem in the seventh century, that a cycle

Δό - - - φα ἐν ὑ-ψί-στοις θε-ῶ
 καὶ ἐ-πί γῆς εἰ-ρή-νη. Σή-με-ροῦ δέ-χε-ται
 ἡ Βη-θλε-ἐμ τὸν καθή-με-νον διὰ παν-τός,
 ἐν Πατρὶ. Σή-μερον ἄγ-γελοι τὸ θεέ-φος τὸ
 ταχ-θέν. θεο-πρεπῶς δο-ξο-λο-γοῦ-σι. Δό - φα
 ἐν ὑ-ψί-στοις θε-ῶ, καὶ ἐ-πί γῆς εἰ-ρή-νη.
 ἐν ἀν-θρώ-ποις εὐ-δο-κία.

(Cod. Palaeofrensis, f. 98 v.)

EXAMPLE IV.

The Byzantine neumes of the first phrase are written on top of the modern staff notation.

of twelve hymns was sung during the ceremony, one of these beginning with the words: 'When to the cross transgressors nailed the Lord of Glory.' These are the opening words of the bilingual hymn *Ote to stavro O quando in cruce*, which we find in the Beneventan MS.

The liturgy of Benevento did not follow the unifying development of the Carolingian epoch; it preserved its peculiar archaic character. Thus we find in a Beneventan eleventh century MS the hymn 'Ote to stavro,' transliterated with Latin characters, in Byzantine pronunciation, and a Latin translation of the hymn, both sung to the same melody, as becomes evident from the musical signs superimposed on the words. Both the text and the melody of 'Ote to Stavro' can be found in Byzantine MSS from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. A comparison has shown that the Beneventan MS contains the same melody, only in a simpler version. This is not surprising. The Byzantine Church has continually developed its melodies, whilst the Western preserved them in their old form, in which they were accepted, treating the Greek elements as venerable incrustations. The first melody which you will hear is the Beneventan version of the bilingual hymn *Ote to Stavro—O quando in cruce*, taken from Codex VI, 38, of the Chapter Library of Benevento, an eleventh-century Gradual; the version of the melody, preserved in the MS, goes back, I think, to the seventh century; the melody itself may be of a much earlier date. You will hear the melody with its Latin words:

EXAMPLE V: *O quando in cruce.*

Now follows the richly developed version, sung by the Byzantine Church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. An examination of this melody has shown that the Byzantine version, which you will hear, is a kind of variation of the ancient version. But you will also soon find out that its cadences and formulae are practically identical with those of the Nativity hymn *Ote Ioseph* (Example III). And yet the expression of the melody is completely different from that of the Nativity hymn.

EXAMPLE VI: **Ότε τῷ σταυρῷ.*

These examples may suffice to show that Byzantine music is in no way inferior to Plainchant. I personally am inclined to think that Byzantine music completes admirably the picture which we get from descriptions of the splendour of the Byzantine service, and helps us to understand and to appreciate the spirit of Byzantine Christianity.

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